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jacob siskind

A musical miracle in modern times

How long a career can a singer look forward to? I have often wondered. The operatic stage has taken its toll of so many fine voices, so many great artists who appear, streak brilliantly across the sky and then disappear with terrifying suddenness.

Talking to teachers of voice over these past few years, I have occasionally been taken sufficiently into their confidence to be told that if one sings "properly" the human voice can retain its quality for a far longer period of time than one usually suspects. It is known that a few operatic careers have stretched for almost a half-century, but these are rare exceptions. Most singers have a decade or two in which to make their careers. They are the ones who have obviously been using this "proper" method. Unfortunately, no two singers or teachers agree on where the secret lies.

MERLIN DAVIES

In Montreal we have a case of a voice in an amazing state of preservation, as evidenced by a private recording made this spring. The voice is that of a tenor of unusual sensitivity. The quality is remarkably round and full and the diction is impeccable. The singer in question must be something of a magician to have retained his voice to this day since his career was at its peak in the 1920's.

He has innumerable testimonials to his singing prowess, but the most interesting for me is a letter from Walter Damrosch, the then conductor of the New York Symphony.

"I take pleasure in writing that in my opinion he is one of the best oratorio singers in this country. His style represents the very best English tradition of our oratorio singing. His diction is pure, his delivery earnest and sincere, his voice very sympathetic. He should be better known in our country."

Today, over four decades later, the same is still true.

Not having had the pleasure to hear him sing at his prime, I have no idea of the glories of the voice then, but I do know that many young singers one quarter his age would be proud to be able to match his current achievement.

The recording in question, made in the RCA Victor studios in Montreal, contains three airs — Spirito gentil, from Donizetti's La Favorita; Danny Boy and Handel's Breathe soft, ye winds. It was recorded this past April, and it is no secret that the unidentified pianist is John Newmark, whose fine playing is immediately recognizable.

The extraordinary thing about this recording is that the singer was retired from his professorship of singing at McGill University over two decades ago, after four decades of service. But you have only to listen to the recording once to hear the wealth of musicianship and sensitivity behind these charming performances.

And it is all the more amazing since the singer has passed his eighty-eighth birthday. This is indeed a record. I mention his age only because there is no need to take it into consideration when hearing the recording.

The man is, of course, Merlin Davies, the Welsh tenor who provided Montrealers with so many moments of pleasure in the many years in which he sang publicly in this city. Mr. Davies was particularly fortunate in his parents' choice of Christian name, for it seems to have been an amulet for him. Certainly nothing else could explain the miracle that has kept his voice in its pristine state all these years. Or can it be that he has always sung in a manner that would do the instrument no damage?

Whatever the cause, I shall guard the copy of the recording he has sent me as one of my most cherished possessions.

Paul Almond's Isabel Here September 19

Thursday, September 19, will mark the Canadian premiere of Isabel, Paul Almond's all Canadian film, at the Cinema Place Ville Marie.

Isabel, which has been stirring up so much excitement in New York these past weeks, stars Almond's wife, Canadian actress, Genevieve Bujold in the title role.

Almond's first feature film, a film about fear, tells of a young woman who is recalled to her childhood home on the Gaspe coast. While staying on to care for her uncle, spring comes and as the winter's ice melts, she finds herself confronted by frightening and almost unreal happenings.

Co-starring with Miss Bujold are veteran Irish actor Gerard Parkes, young Canadian actor Mark Strange and many of the inhabitants of Shigawaka, the community in which Almond made his film.

Isabel, filmed entirely in the Province of Quebec, was produced in Technicolor by Quest Films for release by Paramount Pictures.

The case against the Top Forty pop hit listings

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Top forty rock is popdom's lasting bastion of mediocrity. It is a realm where the mass-media image is projected and where styles are set, where the vocabulary of the press release is a working language, where the "industry" is given priority over the music produced. It is the home of the slick agent who pawns off his pimply teenage product on the public. Top 40 is where quality is measured in sales, where a radio station's playlist is determined by music industry moguls. Realities and philosophies on such themes as love, death, heartburn and acid indigestion are invented to suit the needs of the cash register. Top 40 rock is the Cosa Nostra of contemporary pop music.

At one time, it appeared as if the near-dictatorial rule of the Top 40 system would come to a crashing end. In 1965, a blend of the topicality and lyricism of the folk-song with the big beat of rock 'n roll was born. It was labelled "folk-rock". It's leader was Bob Dylan, who shouted to his newly-found pop audience, "Don't follow leaders, watch your parking meters . . ." It was Dylan who sang Like A Rolling Stone, a song that defied all the standard rules of the normal pop ditty. The length of the song, a full six minutes, more than doubled that of an ordinary hit parade song. Dylan's music was heavy and raunchy, his lyrics were probing, complex, and highly emotional. Like A Rolling Stone was number one that summer. In Dylan's tracks followed other pop minstrels, such as the Byrds, Donovan and Sonny & Cher, who took advantage of the medium to provide a note-worthy message.

Folk-rock, of course, was threatening to destroy the concept of pre-fab pop. However, industry moguls were not caught flat-footed for long: they took action with a vengeance. Censorship was imposed on songs with "questionable" lyrics. A fairly innocent song by Ray Charles, entitled Let's Go Get Stoned (referring to liquor), was knocked off the Top 40 playlist because the words encouraged drug-taking — so the record executives claimed. One chain of Top 40 radio stations insisted that record companies include a lyric sheet with every song they released for airplay. Other networks operated on roughly the same principle. Limits to the length of a song were privately set. Slowly but surely, the Top 40 has returned the days of formula music.

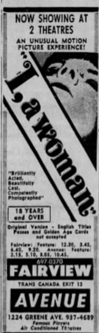
Today the hit parade is in the worst condition since the early sixties. While most of the "serious" pop singers choose the album market as their showcase, the Top 40 has become the almost exclusive property of no-talent groups with a good publicity machine behind them. The latest fad is "bubble-gum rock". Such groups as the 1910 Fruitgum Co., the Ohio Express, Boyce & Hart, the Cowsills and the Turtles now dominate the hit parade charts. These performers all have common qualities. They try to project a frighteningly clean image of themselves to the public. They are scrubbed, dressed-in-the-latest-styles (which are then merchandised in department stores so the "kids" can buy their heroes' garb) and they are fashionably groomed. The songs they croon are simple, devoid of any content that relates to reality. Songs dealing with romance are particularly ridiculous. "You're still my favourite girlfriend, Alice Long", bubble Tommy Boyce & Bobby Hart, a songwriting team that has been dubbed by their agents as the suitable successors to Lennon-McCartney. The Ohio Express sing of love in different terms: "Yummy, yummy, yummy, I've got love in my tummy . . ." One song administered by a coiffured crooner by the name of Andy Kim consists mainly of the words "shoot 'em up baby" repeated over and over. The style of Top 40 love lyrics resembles that of commercial jingles for deodorants and soap suds.

These lyrics, unfortunately, appeal to the 9-14 year age group, and there are enough members of this group to command the loyalty of Top 40's happy playground — commercial radio. Because no involvement is needed to program this pop fodder, it is particularly easy for disc jockeys to play it. The situation in Montreal is particularly distressing, because, unlike other large cities, there is no FM station in existence to program serious pop music. One local station has such a tight playlist that it is not unusual to hear the same thirty songs played six or seven times in a full day.

A long time has passed since people like Fabian and Conway Twitty "disappeared" from the scene. Yet those days are with us again. Dick Clark is alive and well on the Top 40. The question is this: was he ever gone?

THE RED BARON FLIES AGAIN

HALIFAX — German actor Ingo Mogendorf has been signed to play the role of Baron von Richthofen, the formiable World War I German flying ace known as the Red Baron, in Darling Lili. The film, which stars Julie Andrews and Rock Hudson, is currently before the cameras on location in Brussels, Belgium.



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